

## Dawn chorus

Before dawn today don't delay! Open your windows, to enjoy the amazing symphony of birds yelling at the tops of their voices. This urgent outbreak of song is no happy accident of nature, but a critical aspect of the avian breeding season. In the first instance, song is used by male birds to establish their breeding territories. The dawn chorus starts at around one hour before sunrise, when it is too dark to forage for food or to be spotted by predators, so the perfect time to voice intentions vociferously. Also, often there is little or no wind at dawn and less background noise, so sound can carry up to twenty times further than it will later in the day.

The first bird to ignite this concerto is the robin, followed soon after by the blackbird. Song thrush, dunnock and wren also join in. Later, the summer migrants will swell the throng, chiff-chaff, blackcap, whitethroat, swallow and house martin. The cuckoo might also add his distinct call, but he won't stay. On clipped hedges beyond the village, you may be lucky enough to hear the yellowhammer's monotonous tune. But sadly, this species is declining.

Territorial proclamation is highly important but only occurs during the hours of daylight. The crepuscular, dim light of dawn triggers a renewed opportunity for reiterating territorial ownership to otherwise inquisitive neighbours.

Evolution has given birds delicate, hollow bone structures, essential for the light-weight needed for aerodynamics. With hollow bones, comes a certain fragility, and therefore birds in general are not suited to physical combat. Instead, territorial arguments between neighbours are settled with song, as one individual tries to intimidate another with his vocal versatility.

I once listened to two male song thrushes singing at each other late one March afternoon. Usually, during a song quarrel such as this, one male will sing while the other listens before replying. But these two birds were so close to each other that they both sang constantly at the same time. This vocal disagreement carried on until well after dusk, as the rivals eventually fell silent in the darkness.

Cock birds also use song to attract the attention of potential mates. During the early stages of courting, a male bird will frequently sing directly at his partner, impressing her with his masculine serenade. Such intense vocalisation helps to strengthen the pair bond. Birds with varied songs like blackbird, song thrush, dunnock and robin attract potential mates with their range of tuneful renditions.

Research has shown that females of these species are more likely to be attracted to males with more extensive repertoires. The process of natural selection has taught them longevity goes hand in hand with a greater variation of melodic phrases, a desirable attribute to pass on to offspring.

462 words

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